The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
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Elsie Monthei, Mesa, Arizona
Mary Clarke
Iowa Department for the Blind
2-25-2011

Mary Clarke: Today I am interviewing Elsie Monthei. My name is Mary Clarke. Elsie and I met, actually I was her teacher when she was in the adult Orientation Center, and then later on we were co-workers at the Department, as teachers. The date today is February 25, 2011. The time is 8:14 am and the location is the Iowa Department for the

Blind, 524 4th Street, Des Moines, Iowa 50309. Elsie, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Elsie Monthei: Yes, you do.

Clarke: I guess going back, Elsie, to your childhood. Could you kind of explain your growing up years and maybe the cause of your blindness?

Monthei: I was born in Mesa, Arizona. My father was in the Army Air Corps at that time and it was something that was just kind of being established. We didn't have an Air Force at that time, but I didn't stay there very long. This was 1945, and he went out of the Army and went to Idaho where his family was, after his discharge. I was born in the hospital in Arizona and my father had gone to the hospital to be with my mother that day and the airplane that he was on had a mishap and all of his crew people were killed, except him. And, I didn't realize this until I got to talking with my father in the '70s...let's see it wasn't the '70s it was the '90s, when he finally, when I had more time to spend with him. So, I lived in Idaho and my family didn't realize I was blind for a while. But, I was actually born totally blind. And, I was at my grandmother's house. In the night they had taken me to...they wanted to go fishing, and I was at their house, and I was about three-and-a-half. They put me in bed with my grandma and grandpa and they'd gone fishing; and I didn't realize where I was and I jumped up and I hit the wall. (Laughter) I can hear my grandmother's story, you know, she used to...like I'm her namesake. Her name was Elsie Hezeltine and I'm Elsie Monthei, but my maiden name was

Hezeltine. And, I can hear her say, "And I told your mother, I believe that child is blind." (Laughter)

So, they were on a farm; my mom and dad were on a farm. And, I think they even had horses then, too, still and they had to do a lot of refiguring about what to do at that time when I was blind; because they didn't have insurance and they didn't…it was a different time. So, how it turned out, when they determined I actually had fully developed Congenital Cataracts, they thought at first it was from the Measles, because my mother had had the Measles; but later on we learned that it was more of a genetic kind of cataract than it was cause from her having the Measles. But, at the time they thought it was caused because my mother had the Measles. And, my mother had to go to work for the hospital to do painting at the hospital in Boise, Idaho to help pay for my eye surgery because, at that time, maybe you could do that when you didn't have insurance and other things. And, I had the very radical surgery with the cutting into the eye and sandbagging and had to be completely still in the hospital and my mother stayed with me all of the time that I was in the hospital. And so, its different times now. Things like cataracts are an easy procedure and there is a lot less damage to the eye.

So, when I grew up on the farm, then, at age six they decided that I should go to the school for the blind. At that time, it was in Gooding, Idaho; and my family felt that I would have best opportunities and best social environment to go to a school for the blind. At that time, they had planned to move to Alaska; and there were no blind schools in Alaska. And so, I went to the school for the blind, and all in all, I think I had a very good experience there. I believe that I had more opportunity to learn things about art and

culture and opera and seen things that where maybe on the farm I wouldn't have been able to do that.

So, I went to the school for the blind and I had made very good friends, close friends that are still my friends; and I think it was a good experience at the school for the blind. I was awarded a Citizenship award for being outgoing to other people and helpful. So, I was…I had received that Citizenship award. I also was able to have experiences with deaf people. At that time, Idaho was the only school that had a program for deaf-blind, or deaf and blind students. They had separate schools but we did a lot of things together. And I had an opportunity to be in the dormitory with other children who were deaf and so I learned some sign language, mostly survival kinds of sign language, (Laughter) like stop that, or go away!

Clarke: Or fire! (Laughter)

Monthei: Or fire, that's right. (Laughter) And, our joke was in the day time the deaf girls fight with the blind girls, and at night the blind girls get even. (Laughter) And, that's just a joke, because all in all, I think it was easy to get together. But, as you realize, you know, its totally different kinds of communication. If you don't see what someone's saying, then you don't really communicate at a level that's really language. And, when you realize it, when someone waves at you and you don't see it, you're not really snubbing them; then you kind of learn a level of communication that's more, oh I would say, more compassionate because you really do learn more about each other's communications mode. And, I brought one of my deaf friends home at Easter time…that lived up in northern Idaho. And so, she had a chance to ride

horses, and she was Catholic and I was Catholic. So, she didn't have anywhere to go for Easter because, at that time, it was such a long distance away that we kind of planned, you know, to take other students to our homes and have them in our homes. And, one of the things that she told me when we were sitting down in front of the fireplace having something to drink…and, at that time, my family had just built a brand new home and it was just very, very comfortable sitting with her and she told me…she signed to me, "It's so quiet." (Laughter) I didn't really have the means to communicate with her on the dynamic level that she was used to with her deaf friends, but we did have a good time and she enjoyed herself. That's one of the things that I remember about the school for the blind.

Clarke: So, how many years were you at the school?

Monthei: I was there from kindergarten through high school.

Clarke: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Monthei: I do. I have one sister that is older than I; my brother is younger than I. And, my sister is still pretty much a western girl; she rides horses and takes people out on trail rides, and I like to go on those trail rides. I just love to go out and help in the summer, and we just do everything they do when we go to visit my family out there, because they have the horses and I grew up with horses. In fact, I think because I was able to ride a horse and be with my sister, she taught me something; that was to take chances, not to feel afraid. She gave me a lot of confidence in myself. I hear she could walk across a log on a crick and I had to get

down and scoot across. (Laughter) She really did; she taught me a lot of things about not being afraid to try something new and to be…not necessarily to take chances that were harmful to you, but to try to do a job that's hard; and we're still very close. My sister and brother and I are still really close. She still lives out in Idaho and I have a brother that works for Tectonics in Idaho, too…in Oregon…not…he works for Intel there. He always keeps me updated on things.

So, my sister…but at school I will admit even though I had advantages, maybe that my sister and brother didn't have, there were some parts of school that I felt that I really got homesick for one thing, because there would be long periods of time when my family lived in Alaska, like, I'd just see them in the summer. Otherwise, I would stay with a relative, or there was a person really close to the school for the blind in Twin Falls that was a great-aunt and she taught me a lot, too, because she's a typical aunt that likes to have breakfast and likes to have nice things. She was a china painter. What I would do is get on the bus at the school for the blind, and I would go visit with their family as long as my family lived in Alaska. That's kind of the way it was. I did have a chance to see other family members, but you really miss your sister and brothers. I think that kind of made my sister and I still very, very close.

15:00

Monthei: And, it's nice to have close sisters, because a lot of times, even with my own children, there's sometimes what we call sibling rivalry. I don't ever think that there was so much of that with my sister and I. So, my childhood and my early education was…I learned Braille at the school for

the blind. I think I was about in fifth, fourth grade, I believe, and they decided that I should learn Large Print, too. So, I did learn Large Print and Braille. I could remember having to do those mathematical problems on these cube slates. And, you'd do your work and then someone would come along and, oh boy, those cube slates would go on the floor and there your work would be gone. (Laughter) And, I remember that was a little bit of, you know, a hassle. But, I think my experience with the school for the blind really helped a lot as far as helping me to be independent, because we'd have a time to go, like, to the regular stores on Saturday and shop, or go to a movie with all of the whole group, you know, things maybe that I wouldn't have had at home because my family was pretty poor.

When I graduated from high school, I went into Boise State College. I had applied for services in Idaho for the blind and I went into college. And, at that time, they were just starting to formulate their services for the blind. It used to be under Voc. Rehab; their system used to be under Voc. Rehab and the moneys that were available to me were from Services for Unwed Mothers. I worked really, really hard with the group in Idaho to formulate our separate agency for the blind. I really worked hard to do that, because I felt that at that time, you know, it was important to have services separated. And, I believe Kenneth Hopkins was the first Counselor that came out from being trained here at the Department for the Blind; going out into other states to use Iowa Department for the Blind as a model for their services to the blind. That worked out well for me.

While I was in college I got pregnant. I had my daughter, Lee, while I was in college, so I was a single parent for about three years. I finished my college

education. I did my student teaching. I got a job in a rural school in Idaho. But, before that, I worked for a year at the Texas school for the blind and I learned a lot at that school about Spanish and Spanish speaking children, because I was a cottage parent K through, I think, eight; kind of like middle school would be here. I learned a lot about Spanish and speaking Spanish and being open minded and open hearted about different ethnic groups.

It was the first year of desegregation, where the people in Texas had to have their students who were black go to regular school. So, even in the blind community they were beginning to integrate their black, blind students into the school for the blind. There was a little tension when I had that job, because I had hardly ever seen a black person in my life in white supremacist Idaho. (Laughter) It took me a while to get used to going into an office and seeing a very competent black person working, and not just menial jobs for people who were black. It gave me a different sense of what is right. A lot of the older house parents there were extremely prejudiced, because they didn't want black house parents to come into their rooms while they had their days off, to sleep, because they just didn't want them in their beds. They didn't want them around them and they were very open about talking about that to another white person. It was kind of hard for me to assimilate all this. I think I was 20 at the time. But, I learned a lot from the school itself and the fact that I wanted more education. So, John Best was my principal at the school for the blind. I had babysat some of his children. He's the one that invited me to be a part of his team at the school for the blind in Texas. I did that and I really enjoyed that experience. My first job, my first real independence, and I was able to save a lot of money. I had

applied to go to University of Texas. I planned to go finish my education and go to school in Texas, you know, just go ahead and finish my education there, because I kind of liked it, you know, I liked the atmosphere.

One day…they had what they called a canteen, and it was on a Saturday, and I had duty at the canteen with my little group, taking them over to get Cokes and pop and stuff on campus. This is a really funny story. There was a Coke bottle that was stuck up in the machine, and foolish me, I stuck my hand up there to help get this bottle out of this machine and wouldn't you know the whole thing fell down on my hand while my finger was in there. (Laughter) So, here I was on my knees with my hand stuck up in the Coke machine (Laughter) and no one around; no one around on a weekend to unlock the machine. It was really such a funny story because, you know, when you stick your hand up a Coke machine, everybody thinks you're stealing a Coke; (Laughter) and here I was trying to help somebody. After about two hours in a freezing kind of environment with my hand and this whole row of Coke bottles on my finger, they finally got the Coke machine open and they took me to the Breckenridge Hospital in Texas. They wanted to just check and make sure that I didn't have any broken fingers or frost bite or anything. I don't think you could get frost bite, but they just wanted to check me out. It was really odd to tell people what happened, in the emergency room. (Laughter) When you go in the emergency room and you say, "Oh what happened?" "Oh my finger got stuck up a Coke machine." (Laughter) But, I really enjoyed working; I really enjoyed the freedom and the extra money, and I sent money to both my parents.

My mother and father were divorced at this time now, and I had lived with my father when I got this job, and when I was at Boise State College. Then something kind of odd happened that made me decide...and my parents kind of talked to me, too...about not staying in Texas. They had the tower shootings, and the tower shootings were at the University of Texas. A person went up in the bell tower and killed a lot of students from the bell tower. It was one of the first of those kind of intra-terrorist activities. You know, it was such a new thing for our country to have this kind of malevolent attitude towards our government. My parents kind of decided that maybe I shouldn't go to school there and I agreed with them, even though it wasn't the University's fault. But, I think my parents were a little more protective of me as a blind person, and so they wanted me to come home. I thought, I'll see what the...if I can just go back into Boise State College and finish my education. I lived at home with my father until I graduated from college.

I got my first job in Ola, Idaho in a rural school. I really worked hard as a single parent to get a job to be a productive person. The rural school I worked in had a couple of parents who helped me do some of the correction of papers, but all of the other stuff I did myself. The students were pretty independent. I had grades kindergarten, first, second, third, fourth and fifth. The teacher that was there before me had taught them very good skills. I could put their work on each little section of the board but, you see, I had to do all of the coordination of my books and the lessons that each group would take. I had to do things, like, teach English together, like, parts of speech and other things to the whole group, and then they had their independent work to do. That worked pretty good for me. I

could have stayed there a long time and they were pretty accepting of a person having a child, too, that community. They were just lucky, they thought, to get a good teacher and I was given a lot of accolades to stay.

Clarke: So, how long did you teach there?

Monthei: I taught there a year. I met Arlo, my husband. I traded Idaho potatoes for Iowa corn. (Laughter)

Clarke: So, he was out there at the time?

30:00

Monthei: I actually went to Minnesota with one of the advocacy groups at the time. It was NFB. I went out to Minnesota and we met and he was a student at the Orientation Center here. He was there as part of the ways that they did things then, you know. It's different the way we do things now. I came with a group of college students from Idaho to my first NFB Convention in Minneapolis and we kind of had a whirlwind romance; let me tell you! (Laughter)

I was eating lunch with him and our other group from the Commission for the Blind in Idaho, and I said something about…well, we were kind of seeing each other, sitting with each other in the Conference and just going out and doing things as a group. I said something about, "Well, I miss my little girl." I wasn't intending to say anything. Oh, here I had a child, because I just wasn't real open with sharing that with other people. I had gotten really to know Arlo pretty good while I was there. We'd had a couple of dates on the

Mississippi, riding one of the boats on the Mississippi. It was a very nice trip. I mean, I had a really good time. I got to understand better about advocacy and the importance of joining a support…a political group. You know, that kind of fired me up, and then to meet somebody.

He said, "Oh, you have a little girl? What's her name?" So, he got me talking about my little girl. We still were really close, I mean, I didn't get a lot of rejection like I thought I might. (Laughter) I had signed a contract to teach in this rural school that year and it was a very good experience. I loved art, and art was part of my life even back then. My mother and I went to evening classes together. It was time for me to spend with my mother where my father wasn't there, and some of the tensions with having a divorced situation with my family. So, the art work became kind of a relaxing, therapeutic kind of a thing for me a lot of times. So, I taught an art class to these rural people in Idaho in a school with very…I mean, they had to bring their students in, like, maybe 20 miles in the morning to this rural school. It was another 37 miles to the District where the Principal and the teachers and all of this was. So, I was really out in the boonies; I had deer going through my yard. I had quail coming up and getting stuff off of my…and I was a single parent. I had a little girl, too. Another woman had children the same age as my daughter, Lee. She picked up Lee in the morning, and then I would walk up to where my school was. The school had electricity. I mean, it was really pretty modern. It wasn't like a log cabin or anything. It had a coal furnace, but the maintenance person would come up and get the fire going and everything. I didn't have to do anything like that, but it was a very idealite kind of a setting.

Clarke: So, where did you and your daughter live during that time?

Monthei: When my daughter was first born, I lived with my mother. My father had just remarried and it didn't seem like it was such a good environment with my father having a new wife and another daughter that she had. So, I was living with my mother the very last year of college, and the year I graduated from college. This is the year that I went on my trip to Minnesota. So, a lot happened that year.

Clarke: But, then, while you were teaching in that rural school were you living close by or…

Monthei: No, I had my own home. I had a teacherage, and it had a stove that had wood and electric in it. It was a very old fashioned kind of a setting. They had to put a bathroom in before I could move in because it had an Out-House, and the Out-House drained into a crick, which wasn't the best situation. (Laughter) The teacher that…my supervisor in Emmett, Idaho, my Principal, the person that hired me, was pretty open-minded and I think a lot of it was because my Counselor had come and talked to the district and it was a rural setting. It isn't that they weren't kind of, any teacher will do, up here; they were very, very concerned about me being blind. And, when my Counselor came to talk to them and helped bridge that gap between understanding about blindness and a person's capability, it helped a lot. Also, when I spent time with the women's group…they had what they call Social Club, and they'd meet in each other's homes because there wasn't anywhere else to meet. After they got

to know me…my mother had taken both me and my daughter up to see them and they saw, you know, that I was a competent person and charming and whatever (Laughter). They hired me and they accepted me. I brought to that school things like art and culture. I taught a class, adult education, at night for people who were adults. Three of those people now have work shown as artists that are local western artists.

Clarke: Is that right, wow!

Monthei: …that were in my group. And see, I believe that that never would have happened if I hadn't been open about the community. My mother helped me a lot to settle into the community. That community is where my grandparents grew up and they had business in the district town; not in the little town in Ola, where I taught, but because it was the same school district, they knew a lot of the people that were my family. So, that was, I think, a part of that acceptance, too. I really enjoyed my time up there and I really worked very hard to make a difference with those students, and to build some community bonds.

When I met Arlo, we decided to get married in June. This was July and I worked that whole year in the school. He came up to kind of help me get this house ready for me to live in, because it hadn't been lived in for seven years. My parents were a little hesitant at first for me to marry a blind person. They were so into helping me with transportation and other things that they didn't see me so much as an independent person. But, he came up there and when he first started, my mother said, "If you guys get married," if

you do this, if you do that, and by the time he left they were saying, "When are you guys getting married?" (Laughter)

Clarke: He won them over!

Monthei: He won them over, he sure did. Then, that year I went to the National Federation for the Blind meetings, and then we got married in June and moved to Iowa. That was an experience, moving my whole household from Idaho, you know. I have very close family, and I just thought this is what you do when you fall in love and get married.

Arlo was a college student in the Occupational Therapy area. He still had another year to finish in school. I moved into his parents' home with my little girl and I, until he finished his internships. He had an internship to do with his job. He had a Physical Dysfunction internship to do and an Occupational Therapy internship with psychiatric problems. It was in the Vietnam era, and there were a lot of issues with Post Traumatic Syndrome. He worked in Minneapolis for six months, and I didn't go on that affiliation with him. I stayed with his parents during that time, that six months, but I did stay with him during his other affiliation at Yonker Rehab, and stayed and helped with his family as much as I could. I was pretty accepted by his family, too, which was nice. His mother was a very loving individual and non-judgmental. She loved Lee as much as Arlo did, so that was a good to-do. Then, when he got his job, I became a mother, a stay-at-home mother and I was a Girl Scout leader and did all of the things to make a difference in my community, even when we were first married.

And, I told the parents of the students, I said…you know, when I had the Girl Scouts, I said, "I can't drive. You

have to help me. There's no way I'm going to be able to go on camping trips, or do this or do that without help from you." And, they understood that and they were open to having me as a Girl Scout leader. So, I think I did that Girl Scout leader through my daughter, Lee's cadets. I went to all of the trainings and, you know, how to do fires and how to do things. I had a lot of good training through the Girl Scouts.

Then, I had applied for a job at the Department for the Blind, and I had applied for services when my children were no longer at home. I mean, they were all in school, I think it was 1985 when I applied for services to get my art degree here. I had done a lot of painting. I had shown work at the Iowa State fair.

45:00

Monthei: I'd shown work and had sold a painting of the Ivy School, or Ivy Church in Runnells, when they had the bicentennial. They had it out there and my picture was on display at one of the Ivy Church's booths. That was my first real sale of any of my art work; it was a commission. Mrs. Blood at Blood's Grocery purchased my painting. I sold it for $150. Boy, it made me feel really good about my art work. So, I called a Counselor at the Department for the Blind and said, "I want to go for my Iowa Certification in Education." And so, we wrote a plan. We decided that I really did have talent and I could make a living with art, but I wanted to do it as Art Education and Art Therapy, because that's my background. So, we wrote a plan and I really didn't think I was…I thought my skills were good. I had good Braille skills; I had good cooking skills; I did cooking and canning

and…I didn't use a cane all the time, though. That was something that when I went into the program in a plan, I wrote my plan so it would involve Orientation training. And, I believe this really did help me a lot develop an attitude that was different. I wouldn't let people talk me out of my competencies any more.

Even though I felt like I had good skills, there was one part of my personality, or my personal philosophy, that just needed to have some adjustment. And, that was…I went with an interview with Frank Strong, my Counselor at the time, and it was at a school that's a religious school. This person was…I didn't think I had a chance to get any job there, you know, but I went on the interview and what I found that I did, I let that person talk me out of the job. Like, how would I do this, how would I do that and here I'd had education. It just made me look at myself differently, Mary. It made me look at myself and say there's an area of my personality that I need to go in and have modified. And, it wasn't anything that my Counselor told me or anything that I had, you know, when I came into functions with Arlo at the Center or whatever, you know, it wasn't anything like that. It was because I saw this, I don't know if I should call it a defect, but it was a part of my personality that needed to be changed, because you know what I did, I gave and let the person call me…everything that I had done in the art education class and that curriculum guide for making your own plan. I did all that research and work and I let that guy make a copy of it! Can you believe it?

Clarke: Oh!

Monthei: When I realize that I said, "You know he robbed me of my"…he robbed me. He did; he robbed me of my expertise. He didn't want me, because I was blind, but he wanted my expertise. And, that really was an eye-opener for me.

Clarke: Like being taken advantage of?

Monthei: Exactly, exactly! Like, we don't want you but we think that we'd like to have what you've done, because it is not easy to do that; to go through every grade and make a plan for every grade that you are going to be teaching art in.

So, I came in to the Orientation Center and it wasn't as a reluctant person. This is something I really felt I needed. So, with my Orientation experience, I learned a lot about how to deal with people like that, and how to not look at my blindness as something that is undesirable. I went into the Orientation Center and I worked really hard on my Braille. And, I just think I had the best Braille teacher in the world, because even though I knew Braille…I would do all the transcription and sit there and work and work and work to get a job done.

While I was in Orientation, a job opened up for Independent Living. I had applied for another Independent Living job in Home Ec., I think it was. And, I think that it was an internal hiring and you were the person that they hired. (Laughter)

Clarke: They just moved me from one area to another. (Laughter)

Monthei: That's right, and that's okay. I mean, I think that's a good way to do things, but I believe that I had the skills and the artistic…the way that Independent Living service was, it had an art component. And, at that time, I had been helping in the school system at Smouse School, with an art project for disabled children through Very Special Arts. And, I had taught classes in this art class and it was so enlightening to go into a class and be a real teacher in art. And, I made a plan and then I was paid for that through Very Special Arts. And, because I followed that up, I believe that staff saw that I had initiative and that I no longer was going to let people talk me out of my competency and my abilities. I believe that that had a lot to do with why I was hired, because I followed up on things. I did the Braille lessons. I believe because I was a hard worker…even though I'm not the most intelligent person or the most…my grades might not be all "A" grades, but I had qualities that program needed. So, Louise hired me as a teacher in the Independent Living program. It was different then, you know. We did more travel and we had our own whole plan. We didn't have, like, Rehab Teachers like we do now for teaching. But, all of those changes were good that I had to go through, and I really liked my job.

And, I guess, I feel like some of the people that I was advocate for, in that plan, really helped me because I would go to a nursing home…one person that I remember that I was advocate for, and he had diabetes. He'd been in a coma and when he was taken to the hospital, he woke up as a totally blind person and one of his legs amputated. He wasn't expected to live. He was moved into a nursing home and he lost everything he had; his family sold his apartment. They sold everything that was his. He was a blind person in

a nursing home. I think he was, maybe, I'm guessing, in his 28-30 range.

Clarke: Oh my!

Monthei: And, I just thought to myself, this is not where this person should be. So, I opened a case for him. And, I worked with him first to be able to stand. He did lose his other leg, too. I think, eventually, he had two prostheses, but I worked with him with those prostheses; how to cook, how to take his food to the…I worked with the Occupational Therapist there that was working with him. But, she didn't know, necessarily, blindness techniques of how to pour boiling water and things like that. And so, I worked with that group and him. He worked so hard and he deserves the credit. I know I had influence, but, you know, when you work that hard, you have to have the initiative, too. At first he didn't, but I worked with him and finally got him so he could move into his own apartment in Altoona. And, there I had a fight to do, because he didn't want to move into one of the housing areas in Des Moines, because he didn't want to have to deal with some of the people that were not necessarily the most easy to deal with; who were vagrants and other things, in some of the housing. So, he kind of took initiative to where he wanted to live.

So, we set up a plan so he could get from the nursing home. There was funding that he could get his grab bars and wheelchair and other things in this apartment. So, there was a plan for that. And, he lived pretty close to the laundry room. And, what we did…I taught him how to, with his prostheses on, to put his basket of laundry in the wheelchair and wheel it into the laundry, and do the washing and do the

marking. So, we worked hard after he was in his own apartment. And, there was no taxi service in Altoona. I had applied to the transportation for him to have the bus [Correction: para-transit] come to his house to pick him up; I forget what they call it. Anyway, they didn't want to do that. They just didn't want to have a single person…I think he was maybe $20 over the amount of money that would disqualify him to. So, I really fought with her about him being blind. I said, "There's people in that apartment complex who are less disabled than this man and they are getting the service. Is it a service for the disabled or is it a service for the poor?" And, I wrote a letter about that and advocated for him to get services there, and the woman almost said, "Well, you know I can turn him down." And, I thought to myself, this is not right. I talked to Louise about it and finally they said, "Well, we'll let him be on there for a year. We'll let him be on there for a year and then we'll review the idea, and he should try to find a position in Des Moines that he can have other housing so we don't have to go clear out to Altoona."

1:00:00

Monthei: So, I worked hard with that, really. I told Louise what the supervisor had said and I said, "That's terrible to have that kind of a power over someone!" That kind of power to say no, you're not eligible. So, anyway, I haven't really followed up on him, but I did nominate him through the National Rehab Society, I was part of that, and he won a special independent award and we went and got him a suit and shoes and everything he'd need to make an appearance to do this…and we did all that for him under that plan, at

that time. He's one I really felt like I had been a true advocate for.

Clarke: Yes.

Monthei: So, even though, you know, circumstances change and, you know, I don't know that much about where he is at this time, but I got a reader for him, also, through IRIS, to help with his check writing. And, he could never go to work because with his…he had some internal kinds of things going where he wasn't able necessarily to be out of the home. So, there wasn't…he had been a tax person. He had been working for the…

Clarke: Internal Revenue?

Monthei: Exactly, the Internal Revenue. So, I think that I made a big difference for him, because I taught him some computer skills and helped him get established in his home and advocated for services for him. So, he's kind of one I really felt I had advocated for.

Another person that I feel I really advocated for, at one time we didn't have the accessibility to the polls, our national polls. And, sometimes we would either have to try to read it ourselves or have someone go with us like a family friend to read the ballot. And so, I did a lot of work through a national organization, ACB, to get accessibility for our polls. And, I worked with groups, especially on the National level. And Mark…let's see, there was a person that was deaf-blind that I helped [her] vote in her own home where she lives, or in her own community. I would go to the poll office and get a sample ballot, bring it into the Department.

They would Braille it for her so she could read it. She lived in kind of a protected environment, too. But, they had the voting polls set up in this large complex. So, I would take the Braille Ballot to her and she would read and tell who she wanted to vote for and then I'd go do her ballot. And, this was a complicated thing to do, but it was something really important to this woman because she was deaf-blind.

So, working with her…she came in, I think at that time, to the Department to work in the library to check books for errors to put things in order and do other things. She'd get weighed. She'd see everybody and just make a day of it having lunch in the cafeteria. So, I would bring her in and she would have her time to work on a project that she wanted to work on, or do something as a volunteer for the library. I also advocated for her to get the Cochlear Implant. So, I would go, my driver and I would take her to Iowa City and she had a communication device that was…oh, I forget what they're called, darn. It's a little type and Braille that you type the letters in with a keyboard and it comes up in Braille for the person to read.

Clarke: Okay, yes.

Monthei: She had that for her communication device. Sometimes I'd take her to do a little bit of shopping, but not much because I felt that someone else could help her with that. So anyway, it ended up that she did get the Cochlear Implant and I helped her get funding through the National Federation for the Blind to do that. I knew they had this one fund that they could help people, and so originally, I got that funded through the National Federation for the Blind for her and they paid for it all. So anyway, she had…on Sundays,

because they didn't have meals at Wesley Acres…she would come do different…Lee Kline was an advocate for her, too, and I knew him through the Methodist church. He would bring her to different places and John Taylor also helped set up places for her to go. And so, one of the places that she would go was to our house, and have a nice meal on Sunday. Family members and other people would just kind of help her with, I think, what is that thing called? Oh shoot, it's terrible that I can't remember that Braille communication device. Anyway, she was able to have time away from her home. I helped with the voting and I really advocated to get our polls…now that people can have computer processes for…and having their ballots secret; that was really important to me. I'm a Democrat and I worked with Senator Harkin a lot on getting the Disability Act passed. So, I really worked hard for that political part of being an advocate for others, too.

The other person, I think, that I was a true advocate for was…let's see, I was a volunteer for Iowans for International Understanding. And, what they did is, they would have people come from other countries and do an internship for two weeks to three weeks in Iowa, and then they would go back to their country, and they would take the things that they had learned about America back with them. They were persons that were younger, in some cases, or like farmers or lawyers or people that worked in certain areas of expertise, like tourism. And, they came to Iowa to get a perspective of how to do things for some of their emerging countries, like the Ukraine and Moldova and places that were more rural that were after Perestroika in Russia. They had to set up their own democracies and their governments.

So, I worked with this group to bring people over and I opened our home for that purpose. I didn't have a lot to do with the programming, but I had a lot to do with attitudes; because those persons took a different view of blindness back to wherever they came from, so that was important to me to do. To see a successful person that's blind, that's got to have an impact on you. And, if you have some say in whatever you do as an adult person or as a mayor, whatever, you are going to take this experience back with you. And so, we opened our home and sometimes we would have people, like, for two weeks at a time in this program. I was really always really astonished at them looking at the computer systems and seeing the screen readers.

Clarke: Oh, alright, yes.

Monthei: So, I had the screen readers, you know, at the time, and they could see, you know, how I could do my own typing and editing and things like that. But, you know, at that time, it was really strange. One of the people…I think he wasn't screened real well. He went on our computer and went into one of these programs that were for porn. He didn't use any credit card or anything like that, but he went into one of these programs, put the icon up on our computer and he had gone into porn to look at porn. And, he'd done this at night and it just made me so mad that he would do that. I had a terrible time getting rid of that icon. I didn't want that showing up on my computer. (Laughter) Ultimate Sex, I think it was called, or something like that. And, I think that was the only really bad experience that I had with any persons.

Once we had done this international work with Iowans for International Understanding, we had a young person that was in the school system and under the program…he was…his Counselor couldn't find a home for him for the whole year. So, one day I was in the Department doing some volunteer work in the library after I retired. And Sandy Tigges gave me a call and I thought, "What did I do wrong?" (Laughter) She paged me, and so I went down and talked to her and she said, "We had a call from this agency that has a student who is Russian; he speaks English but is blind and they can't find a home for him for his stay in America." So, she gave me the number and I called the person and it turned out that I said, "Well, I don't know of any Russian families that can have him." And, I didn't even think about it being a good match about he's blind and we're blind. I just thought more about him being a Russian than him being a blind person. And, so he was 15.

Clarke: Oh, very young, yet.

Monthei: Very young. In fact, he grew up an awful lot. I mean he shaved. He grew so much that year. He went back a man.

1:15:00

Monthei: He came a child, and went back a man. It was amazing.

Clarke: So, was he like an exchange student over here?

Monthei: He was an exchange student for a year.

Clarke: Oh, in high school then?

Monthei: In high school. And so, the first thing that I had to do is get him some services through Roosevelt school. So, we had to have more than just an eye exam from Russia. So, I had him go to my doctor and get him certified as blind in America. I mean, with an American doctor it was kind of complicated, but I felt that it was really important that he have access to technologies that he needed to survive as a blind student at Roosevelt. So, Mary Noel kind of worked with me to get his IEP together [Note: Individualized Education Program]. We didn't do a formal, what we'd call an IEP, but we did an informal one where it wasn't specific guidelines like you would do for your own children to learn Braille and other things. It was more to provide technology and things that he would need at Roosevelt. He already knew Braille of course it was Russian Braille. (Laughter) He just was a delight.

He was in linguistics and he had an ability that I wouldn't say is exactly mystical, but he could perceive tension in people when he was doing translation and he did better one on one translation than he did at trying to look at and discern a document and change it into English. He was very quick and perceptive about what we call direct translation. And he went to some of the functions with other high school students that were in the program at that time. He did some translation. He really practiced his translating English into Russian and Russian into English with some of the people who came, at the time, through Iowans for International Understanding. He couldn't earn money at that, you know, because he...but he could do it as a

volunteer. So, we got him really interested in American…in Iowa Council of United Blind and he was our speaker that year for the state speaker and he talked about differences between Russia and the United States and blindness, and how different it was to be a blind person in America. He said he learned to use a cane and he's going to take…our organization sent canes and things to him for the school that he belonged to in Russia. He went to a blind school. Novosibirsk is where he lived. He had worked with the school there, and we sent things to his school.

Clarke: Right.

Monthei: They liked our style of cane, stronger and better. Then when he went into college, last week he called me. He still calls me Mom and Dad. He would do things in such a way that made your heart kind of open up. One day we were eating dinner and he said, "I think we've gotten to a point where you aren't Mr. Monthei and Mrs. Monthei anymore. I think you're Mom and Dad." (Laughter) So, he started calling us Mom and Dad, and that's okay with the guidelines that they have with the exchange program. He got…I got him into, because he didn't want to take P.E. at Roosevelt, but he wanted to do something. At Kim's Academy he had like a brown belt or something in defense, and Kim's Academy took him as a case that was different that we didn't have to pay a lot for it. So, he got to do some education with other people in an area that he liked to do. He was a very strong, very physically fit person. Then, learning about blindness in America…he had some issues at Roosevelt, but you know what, they were with Ukrainians. (Laughter)

Clarke: Is that right? (Laughter)

Monthei: He said, "You know, those Ukrainians just..." I said, "This is America, remember. We are open minded and accepting of people." "Okay, Mom you're right!"

One day we were doing laundry, and I had laundry in the...because I taught him how to do the laundry and stuff on his own. I had just finished, I think, some tablecloths or something and he wanted to have something because he had an activity with the high school group to do or another group, and so he wanted something done right now. And, he took all of my stuff out of the dryer, rolled it up and put it in the basket when it was still hot. And I said, "Alexei, this is not the way to do this. If you have to use the dryer, fine, but you don't just role something up." "But I'm blind, Mom." I said, "Alexei, if you can feel that's hot, you can feel that's in the dryer. This is not the way we do it." And I said, "I don't care if you're blind; you're not doing that again!" He was a young kid, and you just had to be kind of firm with him. But, we found that it was much better for Arlo to do discipline with him, because he accepted discipline from a man better than a woman; and I think that's a European kind of an attitude.

Clarke: Were you in touch with his parents at all during this time?

Monthei: Yes, we got to speak and talk to his parents. Sometimes there's kind of a...they like to have some separation like they do in Orientation sometimes, a separation of who is the boss. But, there was an issue about a kind of medicine that he needed to take that would

maybe cause more pressure in his eye, because he had a vaccination for TB and the school wanted him to take this medication and it would be actually…it could have ramifications with the sight he had. Mary, I need to take a break…

1:23:30
(The recorder is still going, but there is a break in the interview.)

1:28:00
(Interview resumes.)

Monthei: I was talking to you about our foreign exchange student that had come from Novosibirsk, Russia. And, he was blind, and having him in our home. One of the main reasons why we decided that he would stay with us, is because we had the technologies that would help him with school; with our screen readers and our other knowledge of how to get his text books in accessible format. He did a lot of reading in Russia, because he had a literature class that he had to do with Russian literature in college. So, for some of his reading Gail Stricker, at the library, researched and found materials that he could read in Russian. She also researched and got some of the longer stuff that he would need to read on tape for his text books. So, the library was very helpful in assimilating him into the school system, as far as the services that they provide to blind persons. And, I think having him certified legally blind was an important part of that process, because sometimes you just have to have American kind of certifications to get the services, even though…I'm not saying that Russian services aren't equal to

or better or whatever; that's not the issue. It's just that for it to have credibility with other agencies you need to go that route, and so we did. And, Gail Stricker was very helpful in getting him things that he could read in Russian for pleasure and for his school text books; and he learned to use tapes. I don't think they had this service available in Russia. So, this is a helpful process for him to take back with him, because he's going to go through college. And, he wants to be a Translator.

He called last week on Arlo's birthday. We were Skyping, and he happened to be on at the same time and he called us and so…one of these technologies that are amazing for us to use as blind people is the Skyping, because it's like you're talking to him in the same room. He had his camera on and we did, too. And, so anyway, he called and told us he wanted to talk to Arlo, because it was his birthday. He said, "But, I'm glad you're here too Mom." (Laughter) He's going to graduate from college in 2013. He's taking Linguistics, now, which is a pretty hard course. There's a lot of reading. It's more analysis of language than it is the specific phonemes and things of languages that make up spoken language. And, he's doing very well with this. Although, sometimes he feels like he has to be just like all of the other guys and get drunk once in a while. And, he was talking about his girlfriend being in Moscow, and him being in Russia, and he really didn't have anybody to hug on Valentines Day. (Laughter)

And, his mother is an artist. So, she sent me a beautiful piece of Russian art that I have in my home. It's a style that is kind of…it's on a cutting board and it's in red and black, which is kind of peasant type of artwork, and it shows the Phoenix and fire and it's very ancient symbols in Russia. I

got to know her pretty well, and we sent her some pictures of my artwork. It's kind of like art is another language, of international cultural exchange, that's been very important in my life as a blind person. So, we still keep in close communication with him. And, our other foreign exchange students that we had…

We had one student through the Lions that was from Spain [Correction: Peru], and she was very nice to have in the home, except she's a little prejudice about blindness. (Laughter) She was in a protected family and she told us, well, she didn't think they had very many blind people in Brazil [Correction: Peru]. (Laughter) It's just the kind of life that she led was not…a protected life, upper class and she really was…and she came to us through the Lions International Program. That's when I still had teenage girls at home, and she really enjoyed having the experiences with our daughters and how open-minded they are and being blind and independent. So, she learned a lot, too.

And, the other foreign exchange students that we had, was students through one of the older European exchange programs and it had a lot of German students that they first started that program with, because they wanted to build positive attitudes with Americans and Germany; when that exchange program opened up after the war. But, now it's a lot more international, too. And, we had her two years ago; and we had a Japanese girl at the same time. They were a little more independent than some of the other students in other programs in some of the rural areas might have been, because we just got them a bus pass and they learned to use our bus system, because American families are responsible for transportation for this program. And so, they got to be a lot more independent that way. And, one thing

that they also…One was German and one was Japanese and we thought well, what a mix. Is this really going to work? But, it turned out that we decided to keep both of the girls. And, we first had chosen the German girl, because we felt that our culture and her culture would meld a lot better; because there's more of the same cultural aspects.

Clarke: Right.

Monthei: And, then our person called us and said…the person that places the students called us and said, "Well, we have one person that if we don't find a home for her she's going to have to go back to Japan. So, will you do this until your other student comes in?" (Laughter) And so, I talked to Arlo and, of course I'd say yes, but you know, you have to talk to your husband about some of these things sometimes. (Laughter) So, he said yes, too. And so, we had her come first. We'd gotten her enrolled in Roosevelt and she wanted to take band and she didn't think she really wanted to graduate, but…so, we didn't get her set up to graduate. But, the German girl came, that we had chosen first, and we decided since we might have a hard time, we couldn't give up our Japanese girl. (Laughter) We just decided that we would have both of them.

And, I think it was a lot harder with the Japanese girl because everything in the culture is so different. You sleep differently, you have different food altogether; your whole linguistics and languages are so different. And, she was Buddhist and not Christian. It was just so many things that were different with her, and I think we learned quite a bit more, maybe, about Japan. And, of course, she learned a lot about American culture and that was what she was here for.

But, she got very homesick and sometimes, because things were so different, she would kind of isolate herself and she wouldn't be with conversations about school or certain...pretty soon I just had to talk to her and ask her if she was happy. She said, yes she's happy and I said, "Well, is there any way, anything that we could do that will make it easier for you?" And, she said she didn't think so. But, she would have things sent to her all the time that she craved like her food and cookies. She would kind of horde that. She wasn't real willing to share that with us as a family. She said, "Well, you wouldn't like it." And I said, "How do you know?" And so, we had a little more issues with cultural, oh what would you call it...it was just so different with her. But, we found that the girls themselves were fine.

The German girl was, oh, what can I say? She was a lot more culturally wise about teenagers and what they do in America and boyfriends. This girl had been isolated in a Japanese family that, more or less, has a male society and a female society. And. she had gone to a Christian school where she had just girlfriends a certain age and didn't go out with any kind of integration with the male students. It's kind of odd how they do it in Japan. Their schools...they have Japanese schools but they're kind of what, I would say, were elitist for the best students ever. You know, they have these schools and if you don't pass certain tests, you don't get into the schools. But, there are a lot of Christian schools that are programs that are handled through Protestant and Catholic agencies that have young kids in school and they learn Christianity, but they also have their regular school program. And so she, I think she was a lot more fragile, culturally, when she came to us and she didn't, you know, have experience with boys.

And, when she went to Roosevelt, there was a little incident where she was kind of harassed at the bus stop when she was getting on and…something sexually inappropriately was said to her and she said to him, "Well, you know, I'm a foreign exchange student and I can't have sex with anybody." (Laughter) And, we talked it through and I said, "You did exactly the right thing." And then, I had to think to myself, should I talk to the school about this? Should I make, you know, what should I do about this to make it stop? And, I talked to Wiebke, and we kind of had kind of a lot of girl talk about things like this. And, we decided that we wouldn't take it to the school, because we didn't want her to be an object of fascination or, because she's different.

And so, we decided if it happened again we'd have to do something about it, but, if it didn't happen again, then we weren't going to worry. I think she handled it very well and I told her that. I said, "I think you're doing the right thing and you handled it well and I don't think that we need to go to the Principal and tell them and talk to them about it, because I believe that you are doing what you should have." But, I did talk it over with the [parents in the] group of other foreign exchange students that I had and they said that I probably did the right thing because they didn't think that…they thought, you know, that she would be made…it would be apparent that something had happened and that she would be pointed out as someone different, and we didn't want that. We thought that she had enough issues of her own. (Laughter)

1:45:00

Monthei: So, after that she got a lot more open about talking about things, if she had problems and things like that. She also took some language programs and she went into a group where there were other foreign exchange students and Wiebke, because her culture was so much the same as ours is. She went into advanced biology and advanced French, because she was from part of Germany that could have been French or German at one time. And so, she was very, very…she was a very good student in the sciences. And, she had made up her mind that she was going to be a…go into DNA and be a DNA genetic specialist while she was here in America, and she took advanced classes for that. And, her parents were so astonished with the change that she had when they came to the graduation. She said, "Oh, she does her own washing?" (Laughter)

Clarke: Now, were these girls, were they blind or were they sighted?

Monthei: They were both sighted, both girls.

Clarke: So, when you talk about wash, it's just that she never did her wash at home?

Monthei: No. I think she was kind of like…the German girl was kind of like Daddy's little princess. But, they'd had exchange students in their family. One was from South America and they just didn't get along with the mother. She had certain expectations and this student didn't meet it, so they weren't able to have him full term. So, she said, "We are so glad that she didn't have to find a new home." (Laughter) I said, "Well, we have always been really, we try

to be very open-hearted and open-minded to help students wherever they are to just have a perspective of blindness that maybe they can take home and be in a position of leadership." So, that's always the motivation for us to do. This had been for that purpose, just to have a more positive view of blindness in an American home.

Clarke: Right. Were those students with you just one year?

Monthei: Just one whole year.

Clarke: The school year?

Monthei: Yes, through the school year, a little bit in the summer so they have a chance to go on vacation. Now, our Russian blind student, I took him out to Idaho to my sister's house for vacation and he loved the mountains. He was from the high plains area in Siberia. He was in Novosibirsk; it's a railroad place. I think they have over a million inhabitants in their university town. It was a very large city. When you talk about Siberia, we think of just the prison. And, Siberia is more like our Great Plains here in America, you know, the weather and things are the same. That's the area that he lived in and his family were able to get some land and they want to have like a truck garden, now. And, they're no longer living in the city. He's kind of living in their old apartment until he finishes college. But, he's living on his own. He's doing, you know, his own food and everything.

Clarke: So, when he was in Idaho, did he ride horses? (Laughter)

Monthei: He did ride horses. (Laughter) He rode horses and he talked to one of the neighbors. He saw a foal, a little baby foal, and just hugged it. We took him on a trail ride. And, we went to one of the Indian, well, there was a graduation in one of the high schools that he went to and it was a small town and so, he got to see a different kind of graduation, because he was only 15 when he came and so, he didn't go through the graduation ceremony like the other girls did. So, we took him to see one of the American Indian gambling…

Clarke: Oh, casino?

Monthei: Casino, to see…and we took him to a target practice range where my brother-in-law has a…He is a Search and Rescuer, and he has to update his target practice, and so he goes to the range and so we took him there. And, we showed him a lot of sights. Oh, I tell you, we had a really nice time with him. Then when we got into…My daughter, Lee, came from where she lives in Idaho to pick us up in Northern Idaho from where my sister lives. We went to the Lewis and Clarke area where the Nez Perce Indians have their camps and sights. We went to Nez Perce Indian Museum where he could see and feel things, and I asked to have that accessible for him to look at, and so they did. When we were in Idaho, in Southern Idaho, I went to Lee's house, and so he got to be with her family for a little bit, because he'd seen her at Christmas. And, then we flew back to Des Moines and he left to go back to Russia from there. So, he had a lot of cultural experiences.

One of the groups that we had for two weeks, we took to the Tama [Correction: Redfield] Powwow over in Tama

[Correction: Redfield] with the Indians. We went to the powwow and they did Indian dancing and got Indian music and, oh, they really enjoyed the day. It was so hot that day; I didn't enjoy it as much as they did. (Laughter) But, you know, it was a cultural exchange. So, that part of our exchange and advocacy has extended internationally.

You know, there's a lot of philosophies about blindness, and I have the philosophy that you don't just talk about it; you do it. And, I know that part of the Orientation training and part of the growing up process…but part of that a class is a class is a class is part of our philosophy is dealing with international now. And so, that's been a very nice experience for us to do. And, I started it before I was even retired, and I won a special award for that, too.

The person from Iowa that is a international person who helped in agriculture all over the world…I think his name's Bormann [Correction: Norman Borlag], from the university? And, he worked all over the world to help raise grain and the world food prize is kind of named after him, and Ruan? I got a special award and got to meet this man, because I had worked with Iowans for International Understanding for advocacy. So, I got to go to that and received my award for that and it's something precious to you, because it lets you know that what you do is valuable to other people. That's really, really important because you kind of…and I got to talk to him before he died. He died, I think, two years ago and they started this National World [Correction: World Food Bank] program that's at the old library in Des Moines, now. They're redoing that. My Garden Club is giving money for that.

Clarke: Speaking of your Garden Club, tell me a little bit about your experiences there.

Monthei: When I was at home with mother I did a lot of gardening, and I like to garden; I like to have things beautiful. I like to do landscaping. I think I got that from my mother, because she told me once that even though she had moved ten times during our parents' marriage, she always left the property in better shape than when they found it. So, I kind of felt, you know, a commitment to making things beautiful. And so, I had a small garden in Altoona and a person came in to the Garden Club and this was, I think, in the early '80s. And, I joined Garden Club at that time. And then, I got my job and I kind of let that fall away, because I just didn't have energy to keep up with another organization. I was pretty busy with my job, and I wanted to really do a good job, and so I wanted to concentrate on being a good employee. So, I kind of let that fall away and then after retirement, I joined again.

And the Greater Des Moines Garden Club, their philosophy is sort of Des Moines' beauty is our civic duty. And so, we give scholarships to DMACC for Gardening. We do things like have activities at the Arboretum and provide fundings for, you know, making a beautiful native area in Boone. And, we do things like, on a community level, we worked at the library to put in a perennial garden and keep that up year after year. The other things that we do is, we take care of one of the bays at the Botanical center. It's like they have a theme and you do something, like a song or a color or something, to represent a season of the year. And, our Garden Club does and designs one of those bays. So, our bay last time, the first time that we did it, was with Dr.

Seuss, because they had a theme of children's literature. This time it was on make me a world of color. So, we did a theme on deep purple, and we have like a little table that's only eight feet by eight to do these little themes, but when everyone does something it's so exciting to go and see what other people do. So, we did this on deep purple and we have beautiful dancers and the music, of course, was Deep Purple and we have a table there and a garden. The green house, then, gives you the flowers and you design the flowers, and then they give you the flowers and they take care of the plants while you're not there.

2:00:00

Monthei: The Master Gardeners do. I learned about Master Gardeners. And so, last year Roger Erpelding said, "I want to be a Master Gardener. And, I know you love gardening." He came to my garden and said that it was so beautiful. He loved the way my garden looked and Gail said, "I want this…or Beth said, "I want this at home!" (Laughter) So, I have that really strong in common with Roger Erpelding. And so, he said, "We're going to do the class and if you want to do it, here's the number you call and let me know if you can get in." So, they had someone who couldn't keep their commitment and so they had room for another person so I got in a little bit late on it, but he let me know about it. So, he said, "Well, go over to the County Extension Office and we'll be your transportation to do it." So, I have a university degree in Master Gardening, now.

Clarke: Is that right? Wow!

Monthei: And, I did all of my 40 hours of work in the hot sun last year to get all my hours in. And, I worked at the fair grounds to help do weeding and whatever you need, you know, they need. And, I worked in the green house at the Botanical Center, and learned a lot about how to transplant plants and keep them safe and do this little tiny fragile thing and leave its head sticking out….(Laughter) out of the dirt. I enjoyed that class very much, because it is a people class. It's sort of like adult 4-H. (Laughter) In fact, they do a lot of stuff with the 4-H students, because it's a country program. And, they do things at the fair grounds. And, one of their programs at the fair grounds was to have a child's garden. And so, I got to prune the roses there and I learned a lot about pruning. You know, you kind of learn not to cut and sometimes you do things wrong and that's part of the plan, you know. It's for ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

Clarke: Did you get involved in, like grafting and things like that, too?

Monthei: Not so much grafting. I kind of know how to do it, but I don't think I could match up the rings on things. They do talk about that, and they do talk about living with animals in your environment. And, they talk about pesticides and how to safely use them. They talk about organic processes. And, the way you tell a real Master Gardener is when they have a decorative compost bin in their kitchen for coffee grounds and scraps. (Laughter) That's how you tell…and I've been a Master Gardener for a long time, I guess, because, I mean, I just got the course and just took the course and I really enjoyed it and I enjoy the volunteer work.

Clarke: In the gardening, is it just floral gardening, or is it also, like, vegetable gardening?

Monthei: It's vegetables, it's flowers, it's ornamentals, it's how to handle pesticides and use pesticides safely. It's Entomology with your insects, and you learn all of the biological things about how insects hurt the world and what you can do to interrupt their birth cycle, so you don't have infestation of grasshoppers. You learn things about helpful insects like bees and butterflies and you learn their lifecycle. And, one of the most fascinating things is you get to go up to Ames and go through their labs and green houses. And, you learn…I did most of my work before I got there, but I asked to have a really good lab partner when I went there so I would have help. And so, they showed us what kinds of pesticides [Correction: pests], you had to identify. And then, you say oh, it has six legs; it has how many legs, like eight legs or six legs, because spiders have eight legs and insects have six. And then, you say well, does it have two wings or one wing? And, finally you kind of narrow it down and you identify it by what you know. And so, I got to feel and see a real walking stick; the little critter that I got to see…and it is larger than you think, about eight or ten inches, and it was live. It was a really interesting creature. You just see those in books, you know, and read about them and then you find out what a help they are to the environment.

Clarke: How big around are they?

Monthei: They are probably bigger than a fat crayon.

Clarke: Oh, okay.

Monthei: So, they are…and they have the three body parts, but they do look like a big stick and that's their protection, because, if they're real still on dead wood or wood, then you don't see them. So, anyway, that was a really fascinating part. And, we learned pathologies [Correction: pathogens] with things that are harmful to you…trees like Mosaic molds and how to plant your tomatoes so you don't get mold, and you learn things about viruses that…on the corn that, like corn crops and corn things. So, they go through all different phases of agriculture.

Clarke: I remember we used to…on the ears we'd call it smut. (Laughter)

Monthei: Yes, and it's black.

Clarke: Yes.

Monthei: And, it's a mold from a animal that has two parts to its lifecycle, one is on the barberry bush. And, to get rid of that, you have to get rid of all the barberry. There's another kind that lives on Cedar trees and then goes to the corn. So, you kind of learn how to do something organically, but you also learn that if you have an infestation of black spot on your roses, your neighbors might not like you very well, if you don't do something about it. (Laughter)

Clarke: (Laughter) It travels.

Monthei: Because it does travel. And, you learn about how to clean your tools. If you go pick a leaf off of a rose plant, and you take it to another rose and clip a leaf, guess what? You're carrying those spores from one plant to another. You also learn to clean up under your roses, because the lifecycle of that fungus, it goes on to the leaf; the leaf falls to the ground; the spores go into the ground and then on the dust next year it jumps up on your plant. So, if you learn that you need to put mulch over your roses and you don't weed them when they're growing, so the dust doesn't get on it or do anything to the soil to disturb it, your roses do better. So, you learn a lot of stuff like that and you apply it to your own gardens, too. Like the roses at the green house at the Botanical Center, that was part of my 40 hours of volunteer work is to prune and take care of the roses there and I did. I worked in the botanical bay to take the dead head stuff, you know, that had bloomed one day and the flowers turn into like a seed like hibiscus. And, the hard part about that is knowing if it's just opening or it's just closing. And, you just kind of have to learn how to do that and it's mostly by feel.

Clarke: Once you enter into that Master Gardening program, how long does it generally take?

Monthei: It takes most people just one semester. You do it one semester, and then you have your 40 hours of volunteer service. So, it's very intense. I would do all of my work…I had a Braille book that the library provided me and a print book, a Large Print. I wanted to have both, because it was available and I think it's important to have Braille when it's available. So, you do your little study at home and then you

have a worksheet that you go over in class to see if you got the questions right. And, that's over the particular part that you studied that week. So, it was such a very nice thing to have Roger ask me to go, because I don't think I would have done it, you know, if I didn't have the wheels. So, I'm grateful for that. Now, my own garden…I have several little theme gardens in my home. One of them is called a garden of good and evil and it's one I designed myself. And, it's been there for a while.

We had a tree die that was a bee tree and an environmentally fragile time for bees because they have that Sudden Syndrome, where they leave the nest and they just disappear. So, I wanted to have the tree removed because it was in danger of falling on our house, and a limb just barely missed me when it came off of the tree, and so it needed to be done; but I wanted it done by a company that was sensitive to bees, and to take this to an area where it would have a chance to form a new colony. So, they did and I learned a lot. But then, we have this big hole in the front of our yard, so you have to do something with it. So, we had a plan. I made a plan, a design, and I called it a garden of good and evil because it's cruciform and because we have arches on the front of our house; at the end of each of the crosses is an arch and in these arches are flowers. It's got brick pavement and I have kind of a classical look about it, because it has benches and the brick. We did it in stages. The first time we dug the hole and put the first stage in, everyone asked me if I was going to put a pool in my yard. (Laughter) Because, it could have been either made into, like a fountain or a reflecting pool, but that's too much work. I wanted something that was permanent and easy care.

Clarke: How big of an area is that?

Monthei: It's probably…the cross cruciform shape itself is probably about ten feet by fifteen feet.

Clarke: Okay, so it was pretty good size.

Monthei: Yes. And on each side of the brick walks, see, there's areas to grow flowers. So, I have cruciform shape and then I have plants on either side; perennials like daffodils on the outside that bloom early spring, and then I put stuff on the inside of that, that comes up later through the whole season. So, I have a continuous bloom cycle. I have lilies, beautiful oriental lilies and Asiatic lilies and I have trumpet lilies in that part, too. And, you know, lilies are sort of a flower that has good and bad connotations.

2:15:00

Monthei: And, most of the things I have can be used for evil or good. Like, I have some wormwood growing there that's kind of a silver Artemisia stuff; and that's found in the Bible, and that was what they made absinth from in the French courts when they had the impressionistic painters. And, it's a narcotic. It's like they have a cult in New Orleans that used that in the early Victorian period in America. So, this wormwood, it has beautiful silver leaves and they call it wormwood. In the Bible calls it bitter as wormwood or the star that's wormwood that's in Revelations. What it does is toxic in the water on a still pond. You can taste how it pollutes the water. It's bitter. It really makes the water bitter, still water, not necessarily where it's close to running

water. So, I have this wormwood and it's got its good qualities and it…because they used to use it as a cough suppressant, too. But, when you distill it into its strongest form, it's a narcotic. It's called Absinth, and it ruins the liver and it's a hallucinogen, you know. It has all these bad things, so that's why I call it a garden of good and evil.

Clarke: Right.

Monthei: And then, at one end of my garden, a statue, I have an innocent Pan and at the other end I have a lecherous…well innocent shepherd at one end, playing the pipes, and I have a lecherous Pan that's got the gold flutes and the legs that stick, you know, the real furry little creature that's in Greek mythology. And, that Pan was a demigod that the Greeks used to believe that was control over sexuality. And, when Pan played his pipes, all of the animals in the spring wanted to mate. (Laughter) And, the English words that come from that word…when you are going through a forest area and you have a feeling that something is uneasy?

Clarke: Yes.

Monthei: You have a panic feeling and panic or pandemonium. So, that's what that term means. It's just a very…I really…this garden is really…I spend a lot of time in it to keep it looking nice, because it's in the front of the house. And then, I have a terrace garden of hostas and other tulips on the side where I have a hillside, and it's got stone in it and I've made it terraced so it won't have runoff and just have the water run off. It's got steps down it, and I did that

myself. And, I have a hosta garden and some different kinds of hostas that are…it's kind of a beautiful foliage plant, so it's really, really pretty. We put in the stone steps that go down the hillside because our neighbors were riding their bikes down their driveway up our driveway across and down the hillside when they were little. Of course, our kids did it, too. But, to put the steps in there, we just decided if they're going to use it for a walkway, let's make it a walkway. (Laughter) So, anyway, we made this area and I have some really beautiful lava rock and other rock in that garden area that I brought from Idaho; my family brought it out to me. So, it's really quite something. And then, I have an herb garden and, of course, you know herbs are good and evil, too. They have their good and bad qualities. I have fresh English lavender that I pick and make potpourri of, but I usually just leave it outside. I don't have time to do a lot of stuff for harvesting, but it's so beautiful and smells so good when you pick it. It's just, oh, this beautiful smell of fresh lavender.

Clarke: Yes, Lavender is beautiful.

Monthei: It grows in what's called a mini-environment that's protected from the winter because it's close to the brick. It's on the south side of the house and the neighbors have a yew hedge along their driveway, so it doesn't get harsh wind. So, I have a side yard garden and I have a little fairy garden for my grand-children there that have little boy, little girl fairies. It's when the clematis bloom. They're big blue flowers that are on a vine and I have them just kind of woven around the fairies. (Laughter) So, it looks really beautiful, too. And then, in the backyard I have a problem

with walnuts. Walnut trees have an acid in them that cause the grass around the plant to grow [Correction: to die]. When a walnut falls it has a husk. There's a brown acid in the husk. Even though it helps the plant have a clear environment to grow in when it sprouts, it kills; that acid kills everything around that husk.

Clarke: So, there's no competition? (Laughter)

Monthei: Exactly; no competition. We call it a predator plant. (Laughter) Even though the wood is really beautiful and it's on my neighbor's side and I don't complain about it much. Except, I had to put little pots of stuff that I sat out there like house plants, and things in the summer or like impatience so I have something next to the patio; because it does give shade, you know, and there's always something good about something bad. (Laughter) So, I have that garden by my patio. And then, I have a great big huge garden around the whole outside of the house that's flowers and I have a area for grapes and I have a area for raspberries and black berries and I put in currents and goose berries last year. We'll see how they do. And, I have asparagus growing in that area and rhubarb and other perennial plants.

And then, I have an area that is in the sunshine that I have tomatoes and I put green peppers in and tomatoes. I don't do really big gardening. Roger's the one you need to talk to about harvesting stuff, because he knows how it feels when it's ripe. He's just really good at that. And, I think he is a super, super vegetable gardener. So, I do have my garden, my Master Gardener and my garden activities.

Now, for my Garden Club, they have a flower show every year and I have won competition for flower arranging

for that. I have won excellence of show. I have won…oh, I did one that had the theme of the fair, so I used a colander and I made it waterproof and I put some branches and apples and apple pie pan on a cutting board and had a burlap backing, and that was a flower arrangement. And, I won excellence on that. So, they have a theme at the Home and Garden show. And, to be a Federated Garden Club we have to have a show, so it's judged. And so, I have won awards in those competitions, but I love doing it.

Clarke: Oh, yes I could see that.

Monthei: And then, for our Garden Club, itself, I'm Chairman of the tea table. And, I'm responsible for the flower arrangement for the theme that they have in the program every month. So, I coordinate with the social committee that does the food and I do the napkins because that's kind of in, you know, it's with the tea table itself. So, and guess what? Sometimes I use my own flowers. Sometimes I just get flowers because, like, this time of year there's not very much growing, so I have a…oh what do they…there is a fund to help provide the flowers and that. So, I have an intern, now, that I'm teaching to do it, too. And, she's done a couple of tables and helped me with others. So, it's nice that new people want to do it and you want to share your experience.

Anyway, let's see, the other thing…I talked a little bit about my advocacy, talked a little bit about…I'd like to talk a little bit about why I belong to a support organization.

Clarke: Alright.

Monthei: Because, I think that's really important. And, when I first was in college and I came to Iowa, I joined the NFB and I met my husband. But, you know, I didn't stay in NFB. It got to be issues that I didn't agree with; some of the policies, especially about their attitudes towards other blind organizations. And, some of the things that were happening at the time I didn't agree with. And, it's just a matter of, you know, your own philosophy what you think is, you know, what you think is more your lifestyle. So, for a long time I didn't join a, what we call, support group or political group or lobby group. And then, when I worked here I could see the value of…I think Lisa Davis talked to me first about joining a support group, because as a blind person there's some things that our Department can't pay for and they can't do because of state law. And so, we can fill in some of those areas when we have a support organization. And, sometimes people, after they leave the Department, need some kind of organized area to be with. And, there's always advocacy kinds of things and political kinds of things that you need to take to your senators, and we can't always do that at the state agency. So, it's really important to belong to a support group.

And, I believe that at some times when you see things happening through the Department that you don't think is…maybe things aren't being spent right or maybe there's too much emphasis on this or too much emphasis on that and you don't think that our budget is being used right, you always have people behind you who agree with your thinking. And, you can bring that to the attention of staff or the board or, you know, you can work as a group that has a voice. And, you're not just a lone person out here in the wilderness who goes to the board meetings and see how

budget is being used and you don't agree with moneys going to other organizations or other this or that; you have a voice and you can say what you believe and you have others behind you that believe the same. And so, there's value in that. And so, I have joined American Council for the Blind. And, I've been a member for about, oh, I'd say maybe 15 [Correction: 20] years or more.

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Monthei: I didn't necessarily get so active when I was a single, you know, when I was a parent at home, but I would always support the Department. They would send me things about, oh, there's a danger of the library getting moneys taken away because they wouldn't have Free Matter for the Blind. They're going to cut out those services, and that impacts a lot of blind people. And so, I would come in as just another blind person who could call and say, "You know, this is what I receive. This is what I get. This would be totally irresponsible to have this funding cut out so things can't be mailed in the library." And, you can do that as a group, and you can do that if you want to have a resolution made that might change policy and so with our national and state governments. So, that's why advocacy or your support groups are really important. And, I think you just have to feel, you know, goal...and look at the ones that you think you feel best about and then you join.

So, there's a way that you can use your advocacy groups through molding policies at the Department or personnel that's hired or how money is being spent. You have a voice and all you have to do is be put on the agenda. And, it's really important that you, as a blind person, see

what's happening at your Department because you have a lot invested in it; it's your state Department. It doesn't belong to one national organization or the other, but you need to keep yourself involved with how things, and why things are done. And so, in order to do that, you need to have pull with other blind people. So, that's about the…I think.

That's about all I need to say. Except, at the national level, I am president [Correction: Visual Arts Chair] of Friends in Art and I do an art show of blind persons. And, I kind of developed that area so other blind artists can show their work, and we have a prize that's awarded to them. And so, I've been able to do something with visual arts. So, the whole organization isn't just focusing on music and poetry and literature and writing. So, we've gone into another area with the visual arts. And, a lot of persons who are recently blinded, they feel that all their whole world is going to fall down the drain because they can't do their art work anymore, and we help people over those bumps. And, of course, with my art work…I had a picture shown here at the Department and we had, I think…I was told that the Department wanted to purchase some of my art work.

And, this is when I'm not going to use any names, but a person that did the Treasury work, or was our person that handled the moneys, was stealing from the Department and he never gave me any money for those pictures. And so, I didn't realize that some people thought we had purchased those pictures. And so, there was kind of a little bit of issue over that, and it's too bad because I would really have liked…I donated some but, you know, it would have been nicer to have the money for it.

Clarke: That was quite a few years ago.

Monthei: It was a long time ago. And, it was a really bad time in…I think our Director at the time just really handled it well. You know you can't take blame for that, because we didn't know necessarily that it was going on, but he was putting things through, pennies for his personal use, and oh, he was not the best person to have in a responsible fiscal person. It was a bad time for us. But, you know what? We overcame it! (Laughter) We pulled through as an agency and we pulled through as a group, because we had a cohesive relationship with all of the Departments and we were able to stop this person.

Clarke: Anything else that you can think of?

Monthei: One other thing about art. I've always advocated for blind artists and I've been a positive advocate for them. When Ann Cunningham came to the Department she had, well there was a committee set up to look at her art work, and decide what art work we would have in the Department. And, I really think that she did a very good job with that art work. And, when I came to her workshop, I got to see her as another artist. And, that workshop helped me overcome some of my kind of negative feelings in a way, because she was providing this art activity for blind persons and it was good. But, one thing about…and I thought when I came to do this I had a lot of negative vibes from other people because it was primarily a National Federation for the Blind supported group, though, the Department was very neutral and, like they always work towards being. And, the one thing that's different from her and that different in me…and I

said, "You know what I do; I enter my art work into regular competitions with other artists. I have had my work purchased by one of the people who…I've had my art work purchased by other blind persons and I have been an artist in a different way than you have. And, that main difference is you're not blind. And, I am a blind artist and I don't think that I'm any better than you; I think that we should work together as artists to promote works for the blind or works, you know, with blind persons." And so, it kind of helped me get over some negativity about maybe how another blind artist could have been turned down for this art work here.

You know, it was a hard thing for me because I am an artist, and maybe I'm not the same kind of artist that she is, but I still have credibility and I still am a working artist. And, this week at Hoyt-Sherman, my art work is on display. And, the Department, when I have art work, has always had the students kind of come and see. So, that's always been good you know if they know about it. Sometimes they don't always know. But, now, this time, I took in some free tickets for Sunday for the students to go to a activity outside the Department to Hoyt-Sherman where I have a piece hanging for the ladies' art All Iowa Art Competition. So, your art work, it kind of consumes a lot of my life. And, I have very, very positive feelings about art work and artists and as a blind artist.

Oh, the one other program that I wanted to talk about is the mentoring program. I was in that program and I had some…when I retired I was a part of that program. And, I guess I kind of felt that one organization was favored a lot more than the other organization, over how that money was spent. And, I just have pretty negative feelings about some of the ways that that program went. And, I was kind of

looked at as not a credible…I had no credibility. And, it took a lot of me coming in and being in that program every week, you know, when they had their meetings and seeing how that money was spent, because it looked to me like it was becoming a pyramid where NFB students were sent to NFB and all their things were being paid. And then, another NFB person was appointed as advocate. Now, that first two years I wasn't even chosen to go. And, one thing I want to tell you about that program, I never accepted a dime for all of the time that I was in that program. I did everything and expected everything on my own. I paid for everything that I did with the student. I never accepted a dime from that money and here that money was going for whatever. And, I think that money should have been spent or monitored differently.

And, it's too bad because most people who were in that program felt that it was NFB money that was coming down to people or coming through our agency, but it wasn't. Just because it looked like it was supporting NFB policy and NFB programming and so on; it was Iowa's money. And, I had talked to our Director at the time and said, "Why don't you give some of that money to other of the support groups that aren't organized?" He said, "Well, I will. I'll do that, but I want to use it with the students first." And so, I felt that some of the moneys weren't always used wisely. A lot of the students kind of felt that that was an NFB program because it wasn't; it was Iowa's money. And, I guess I just kind of felt that maybe things could have been managed a little better.

Clarke: So, you were in the mentoring program for one year, then?

Monthei: No for six years.

Clarke: Six years, okay.

Monthei: Six years and some time…

Clarke: Did you have a different student each time?

Monthei: The first couple of times I didn't have a student, and then I was assigned a student that had some mental issues and other things, and I think I was able to help her a lot. She joined NFB and she went to work in our library. She had, you know, some mental issues and other things. And then, towards the end of the program, I had another student that I had assigned to me that did come to National and I did help her but you know what? I spent my own money to go.

Clarke: Okay, so basically your students that you mentored, it was then their decision to make decisions as to what they were going to do, or how did that…

Monthei: I believe that there was undo influence on having the one organization favored over the other, through the program. I don't think…

2:45:00

Monthei: I think it happened, like every time that we had a weekend, an NFB person from out of state was flown in at our expense, and only one time did the staff have a person from the American…ACB flown in. And, I believe that all of

that money that was spent on people coming in and going to the banquets and going to this and going to that were NFB. And I believe, now this is just my feeling, that our Director at the time, wanted to have a student organization for students set up through the Department mentoring program. But, it was actually more like the original student organization for NFB. And, I went to some of the meetings that just really told that to me. And, I have a document that I took to the Governor about that. I went on my own, unfortunately, instead of as a…I went as a former employee because I just didn't feel it was right. And, it was a bad time to take it to…because it was when our governors were changing and it just kind of got misfiled because, you know, I really had issues with that mentoring program; I really did.

Although, I believe the students benefited from it, but it was not NFB's money; it was our Iowa money. And then, some of our money out of Gifts and Bequests was sent to, or people were sent, to NFB to go for training. And, I think we're better than NFB, and I never think that training money should have never been spent that way. It never should have been spent that way out of Gifts and Bequests. And, I felt that sometimes I was being kind of raped by NFB.

Clarke: Do you think…okay you've pretty much covered like your education, social, anything other…social that you want to include yet?

Monthei: Social meaning as far as?

Clarke: Maybe your social activities or…You really covered a lot of area.

Monthei: I think…let me think. One thing I want to say is I have a great deal of, oh I really have a great…I want to see us as a state agency as a primary provider of services in the state. I have received so much from this agency, and my family. I have two girls who are blind who went to college, and one was recently a Director at Deaf-Blind Services in Milwaukee, but I have a lot to give back. I have a lot to give back, because I've received a lot as a blind person from this agency. And, it's really, really been a part of my life that I feel it's important that it survive no matter what political persons are in, you know, what political NFB or ACB. And, we overcome any kind of partiality with our funding. I think that's extremely important.

Clarke: Well, Elsie, I sure appreciate all the sharing that you did and just the awesome experiences you've had in life so far. It's been a good interview.

Monthei: Okay. And, I have always been an advocate for our agency as a state agency. And, one of the issues that we had when we had the guide dog issues and I thought we would be able to overcome when a student wanted to come into the Department, or she had been here and she wanted to have a guide dog with her. That was one national issue that I thought, you know…when one part of a political group gets too wealthy, too much power, they like to be able to dictate things to other state agencies, in other ways…and when they didn't even know the issues.

I went to National this year, and I was kind of treated like a piranha [Correction: pariah], because I didn't agree with our state's policy about that issue. I believe that our state agency provided this person with services and that we

shouldn't be faulted for it, and so did the courts. And, I'm glad the way it turned out with the courts being supportive of our agency. And, we have to be independent of pressures from outside and just kind of keep ourselves busy and active and support the other parts of our agency like Friends in Art and our Friends of the Library; other parts of that whole totality of our services. As a blind person we need to keep aware of what's happening.

Clarke: All right. Well, thank you, Elsie, for taking the time to spend with us. This has been great.

Monthei: Thank you.

2:51:54
(End of Recording)

Beverly Tietz
3-16-2011